

**Committee on International Relations**  
**Statement of Chairman Christopher H. Smith**  
**The Plight of Religious Minorities: Can Religious Pluralism**  
**Survive?**

**June 30, 2006**

The Subcommittee will come to order, and good morning to everyone.

Today the Subcommittee on Africa, Global Human Rights and International Operations will hold an oversight hearing on “The Plight of Religious Minorities: Can Religious Pluralism Survive?” All over the world, unfortunately, religious believers endure discrimination and persecution, and often suffer far more from war and communal conflict than the average citizens of the lands where they live. We have many times highlighted their suffering, and will continue to do so. But in most cases, their existence as communities is not threatened. In fact, in many of these places religious belief and practice is growing. Despite severe persecution in places like China and Vietnam of Christians, Buddhists, Muslims, and Falun Gong, religion is thriving. Truly, we see daily proof of what the early Christian writer Tertullian said 1800 years ago: “the blood of martyrs is the seed of the Church.” Despite discrimination and extremist violence, Christian minorities in India, Sri Lanka and Indonesia continue to grow.

Today’s hearing will rather focus on religious minorities whose very existence is threatened, by war, civil conflict, severe discrimination and outright persecution, communities whose continued existence is, however, vital for the development of civil society and stable, pluralistic democracy. The minority communities in Egypt, Iraq, Iran, the Holy Land and elsewhere have for centuries been bridges between their countries and the outside world, and they usually contribute a disproportionate share of the business

leaders, teachers, doctors, lawyers, engineers of their respective countries. They have been important channels for the introduction of democratic ideals and the development of civil society. Yet all are under great pressure, and their numbers are declining rapidly, in absolute terms and in percentages.

We justly lament any loss of diversity in the material world, yet we all too often overlook the incredible diversity of religion, liturgy, culture, art, history and literature which the Middle East represents. There are dozens of Christian groups with rich histories, ranging from the ancient Syriac and Assyro-Chaldean churches who still speak the language of Jesus Christ, and Coptic Christians in Egypt, who preserve the language of the Pharaohs; through more familiar Greek Orthodox and Catholics, to vibrant young communities of evangelicals. And this is only a brief sample. There are followers of John the Baptist in Iraq and Iran. The Zoroastrians of Iran go back perhaps three thousand years: it was under their tolerant influence that the Great King of Persia, Cyrus, ended the Babylonian Captivity of the Children of Israel. There are Muslims of all varieties, Sunnis, and smaller groups within the Sunni tradition, such as Sufi sects and Wahhabis, Shiites, Druse, Ahmadis, Alawis, and others. There are the Bahai's of Iran, who grew out of the Muslim tradition into a universal religion of peace. The Jewish community: in Iraq produced the Babylonian Talmud, and countless scholars. Egypt became the home of that hero of all civilizations, the great Moses Maimonides. The Jews contributed enormously to the flourishing of Islamic civilization, which in its time surpassed anything in the West. Yet members of all of these groups either suffer discrimination and persecution, or live with constant threat of both.

Such persecution and discrimination, on the one hand, and economic insecurity and physical danger resulting from armed conflicts, on the other, has led to a drastic and continuing decline in the Christian minority population in Palestine, Iraq and Iran, and to a lesser extent in Egypt. The Jewish and Zoroastrian communities in Iran have also declined severely. Exact numbers are hard to verify, but the trend is unmistakable: If it continues, these communities could soon disappear. In many cases the situation may be significantly worse than numbers show, since many of those who remain are old, while a disproportionate number of young people have emigrated.

Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, the population of Iran has nearly doubled. The number of Christians in Iran, however, has declined from about 300,000 to about 100,000; the number of Zoroastrians, formerly estimated to be 35 to 60 thousand, may be as low as 10,000. The largest non-Muslim group, the Baha'is, are generally not allowed to emigrate, but the persecution they are subjected to is meant to exterminate them as quickly as possible. Baha'is are denied protection of the law against violence from Islamic extremists, refused access to higher education, and periodically subjected to official detention, torture and execution. Baha'i marriages are not recognized, rendering Baha'i married women subject to accusations of prostitution and making Baha'i children illegitimate. Baha'is are not permitted to assemble, to teach or practice their faith, or maintain links with co-religionists abroad. Their religious property has been confiscated, and some of their most revered religious sites in Iran have been destroyed.

Iran was one of the last refuges for Jewish communities outside of Israel. The number of Jews has declined from about 80,000 to about 25,000, still, tragically, the largest remnant in the Middle East of a community which once numbered over a million.

Officially protected, they are under severe pressure from official policies promoting anti-Semitism. Members of the Jewish community have always been singled out on the basis of “ties to Israel,” whether real or perceived. President Ahmadinejad and other leaders have publicly denied the Holocaust and stated that Israel should be “wiped off the map.”

In 1987, the Iraqi census listed 1.4 million Christians. Today it is estimated that there are only about 600 to 800 thousand left in Iraq. As many as 60,000 or even more have fled since the Iraqi insurgency began. Their exodus accelerated in August, 2004 after the start of a terrorist bombing campaign against their churches. In many parts of Iraq, there have been widespread reports of Christian small business owners fleeing the country due to newly instituted local regulations against the selling of alcohol, of Christian women threatened for not adhering to strict Islamist dress codes, of Christians being denounced as collaborators with the United States.

At the time of the creation of Israel in 1948, it is estimated that the Christians in the whole of Palestine numbered some 350,000 (in some 15 denominations), almost 20 percent of the total population at the time. The number of Christians in Israel and the West Bank is today about 175,000, with only 50,000 in the West Bank, just over 2 percent of the entire population. But the numbers are rapidly dwindling due to mass emigration. The continuing conflict in Palestine has devastated the economy, particularly for Christian areas, whose economies are heavily dependent on pilgrimages, which both terrorism and the measures to counter it severely disrupt. Rising Islamic fundamentalism, and continuing uncertainties about the legal status of the Christian communities in the Holy Land, only compound the problem, and push Christians towards emigration.

Egypt's 6 to 10 million strong Coptic Christian community has an emigration rate three to four times that of Muslims. Coptic Church sources estimate that over a million Copts have left Egypt in the past thirty years. Each year thousands of Copts convert to Islam, many under pressure. Violence against Copts by Islamic extremists often goes unpunished. The government discriminates against its large Coptic Christian population (and other Christian minorities as well) in part to appease the Islamists who threaten the regime. Egypt's small Bah'i community was made illegal forty years ago, and the few remaining Bahai's are treated like non-persons by the law.

But we must emphasize that Muslims also are victims. Shiite minorities suffer varying degrees of discrimination and persecution outside of Iraq and Iran, especially in Saudi Arabia, where the ruling Wahhabi sect forces all Muslims, even Sunnis from different traditions, to adhere to its extreme fundamentalist interpretation of Islam. The Sunni minority in Iran suffers discrimination at the local, regional and national level. The Ahmadis (mostly in Pakistan) consider themselves Muslims, but that status is denied them by the majority community; and they are treated as apostates. They are subject to mob violence and severe discrimination in all walks of life.

But even majorities suffer in these countries. No devout Shia in Iran can defy the mullahs, no faithful Sunni in Saudi Arabia can contradict the religious police. Muslims with different interpretations of Sharia in Egypt can be excommunicated and forcibly divorced from their spouses. There can be no better illustration of the principle that no one can be secure in his or her freedom unless everyone is. The continued existence and the protection of the rights of religious minorities will also be a guarantee for the

individual rights of the members of majority religions. They are a flesh and blood pledge that freedom exists for all members of society.

We must all strive to protect these communities, not simply as “museum pieces” for tourists and scholars, but as Pope Benedict XVI so eloquently stated recently, “as a living communit(ies).” As such they are indispensable building blocks for the democratic, pluralistic, rule of law societies we hope to encourage. Only if these communities survive, will we be able to honestly say that we have brought freedom to this vital region.

We will hear from our distinguished witnesses what we are doing to preserve religious pluralism, and what more we need to do. We are especially favored today by the testimony of the distinguished Chairman of the House International Relations Committee, The Honorable Henry Hyde. He will be followed by The Honorable John V. Hanford III, Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom, U.S. Department of State and Ms. Nina Shea, Vice Chair, U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), who can speak authoritatively about the entire problem which concerns us. Our last panel will provide us with very direct accounts of the difficulties suffered by three groups. Father Firas Aridah, Pastor of Our Lady Mother of Sorrows Catholic Parish, in Aboud in Palestine West Bank; Ms. Rosie Malek-Yonan, Assyrian-American Author, and Ms. Kit Bigelow, Director of the Office of External Affairs, National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of the United States.